

Turkey-US relations remain fraught

Author:

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ANKARA: Tensions between the US and Turkey will continue in the near future, with the latest developments “ringing the alarm bell,” experts warn.

Since October 2018, when a Turkish court permitted Pastor Andrew Brunson to return to the US after a two-year sentence, relations have still not reached their optimal level.

Despite high-level talks over recent weeks, Washington has showed little inclination to accept Ankara’s demand to establish a 32-km safe zone under Turkish control on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River in Syria after the US announced its withdrawal from the area.

The negotiations have not yet led to an agreement and Turkish President Erdogan recently criticized the US over its delay after Turkey demanded US support for the withdrawal of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia from the region.

However, in January, Trump threatened to “devastate” the Turkish economy if the country attacked Kurdish forces supported by the US against Daesh, despite Turkey’s strong objections.

The recent visit of US First Lady Melania Trump to a Gulen-movement-linked charter school in Oklahoma on Tuesday also sparked intense debate in Turkey and is likely to further antagonize relations between the two allies.

Ankara believes that the Gulen movement masterminded a failed coup attempt in the country in 2016, and Turkey formally requested the extradition of its US-based leader Fethullah Gulen three years ago.

From a bilateral trade perspective, Washington announced on Monday its plan to remove Turkey from its list of countries with duty-free access, claiming that Turkey “is sufficiently economically developed.” The preferential trade treatment has allowed some exports to enter the US on a duty-free basis.

However, Turkey’s weakening economy, set against the backdrop of a steep drop in the Turkish currency, is likely to be undermined by this decision. Turkey was the fifth-largest supplier to the US with a share of 8.2 percent of goods. The US imported about \$20.9 billion of goods under this preferential scheme in the first 11 months of 2018, according to official figures.

The escalatory moves did not stop there. On Tuesday, top US General Curtis Scaparrotti said that the US should not sell F-35 fighter jets to Turkey, a NATO ally, if Ankara purchases the Russian S-400 long-range air defense system.

Ankara has a critical place in the F-35 program as some parts of the jets are built in Turkey. Turkey had refused to meet the Feb. 15 deadline set by the

US to cancel the purchase of the S-400 system.

The US had been trying to convince Turkey to buy the Patriot system instead, which is compatible with the NATO defense system. Washington had warned Turkey over possible US sanctions against those who engage in business ties with the Russian defense industry if the purchase was made.

Ali Cinar, a US-based foreign policy expert, said that the lack of trust between Turkey and Washington is likely to continue in 2019, especially in the light of the S-400 issue.

"I don't expect further deterioration. However, we will see ups and downs in the relationship. An unstable Turkey does not benefit the strategic interests of the US and Turkey, nor does it serve peace and stability in a region already devastated by volatility," he told Arab News.

He thinks that the partnership between the US and the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia will further strain ties.

But according to Cinar, the two countries do not have the luxury of losing their friendship, and high-level meetings between American and Turkish officials should serve as an opportunity to repair it.

David Satterfield, who has held top posts at US missions in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon, was recently appointed by the White House as the US ambassador in Ankara. The post has been vacant since October 2017 when the former American ambassador left the country amid a visa crisis between Washington and Ankara.

According to Mehmet Ali Tugtan, an expert on transatlantic relations from Istanbul Bilgi University, the main controversy arises from Turkey being allied to two great powers who are engaged in strategic rivalry.

"At some point, you reach the limits of playing one side against the other," he told Arab News.

"If Turkey acquires both S-400s and F-35s, she would possess area denial capability to both Russia and the US – not to mention her European allies," Tugtan said. "In F-35 she would also possess a formidable power projection capability against her regional neighbors."

Tugtan said that the US does not want Turkey to have these capabilities at a time when the alliance between the two countries is in doubt.

"So, the typical US approach in cases like these is a combination of positive gestures, such as the Patriot offer, threats like denying the F-35s, sanctions like the removal from the preferential trade regime and symbolic warnings like the Melania Trumps visit," he said.

"Although there is no immediate threat of a flare-up, Turkish-US relations are unlikely to rise above this low ebb in the foreseeable future," Tugtan said.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, thinks that recent developments in US-Turkey relations indicate a perfect storm similar to the one witnessed last summer.

“If short-termism prevails over long-term strategic thinking, the vulnerability of US-Turkey relations, emanating from the lack of a relevant strategic framework, mutual distrust and ownership problem could crystallize,” he told Arab News.

For Unluhisarcikli, coinciding with weakening links between the EU and Turkey, further deterioration of relations with the US could put Turkey on a path away from the West.

“This situation is not easily reversible unless there is a strong political will on both sides to do so,” he said.



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Turkey tells US not to leave power vacuum in Syria withdrawalAction in east of Euphrates seen as a way to implement US-Turkey deal

Iran lawyer convicted after defending women protesters

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By JON GAMBRELL | AP

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Wed, 2019-03-06 15:05

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates: A prominent human rights lawyer in Iran who defended protesters against the Islamic Republic's mandatory headscarves for women has been convicted and faces years in prison, an activist group said Wednesday.

The conviction of Nasrin Sotoudeh, who previously served three years in prison for her work, underlines the limits of challenging Iran's theocracy as it faces economic pressure exacerbated by the US pulling out of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

It also highlights the limits of Iran's civilian government as well, as the administration of President Hassan Rouhani and others have signaled an easing of their concern over the mandatory hijab.

It shows "the insecurity the regime has to any peaceful challenge," said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran, which reported Sotoudeh's conviction. "It knows a large segment of the country . are fed up with the hijab laws."

Sotoudeh, 55, was convicted in absentia after she refused to attend the trial before Tehran's Revolutionary Court as she was unable to select her own counsel, Ghaemi said. The Revolutionary Court conducts closed-door hearings over alleged threats to Iran's government.

The charges range from her membership to a human rights group to "encouraging corruption and prostitution." That suggests her detention in part relates to her defense of women who protested the mandatory hijab.

Sotoudeh's conviction was not immediately reported by Iranian state-run media. Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The Center for Human Rights in Iran relied on information about Sotoudeh's case provided by her husband Reza Khandan, who separately faces a six-year prison sentence over providing updates on her case on Facebook, Ghaemi said. Sotoudeh received the awarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Union in 2012. Her previous clients also include Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi.

One of Sotoudeh's clients in the hijab protests received a 20-year prison sentence, showing the sensitivity authorities felt about the case. Ghaemi said he believes Iran's theocracy connects the hijab protests to the nationwide economic protests that happened around the same time at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

"It is part of the same pattern of wanting to put an end to any peaceful protest on the street," he said.

The hijab and chador – the flowing, all-encompassing robe for women – have long been parts of Persian culture. They became political symbols in 1936, when Iran’s pro-Western ruler Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the garments amid his efforts to rapidly modernize Iran. The ban became a source of humiliation for some pious Muslim women in the country.

As the 1979 Islamic Revolution took hold, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered female civil servants to wear the chador. At first, thousands of women protested the decision in Tehran and Khomeini later said officials should not insult women who chose not to wear it – though he also called the chador “the flag of the revolution.”

The hijab and loose-fitting clothing later became mandatory for all women in Iran.

In Tehran today, some fashionable young women wear tighter clothes with a scarf loosely covering their head, technically meeting the requirements of the law while drawing the ire of conservatives.

In December 2017, Tehran’s police said they would no longer arrest women for not observing the Islamic dress code as video clips of women choosing not to wear hijabs and walking the streets with their heads uncovered spread across social media.

Protests followed, including a much-circulated image of a woman atop a junction box at an intersection of Tehran’s famed Enghelab, or “Revolution,” Street, waving her white hijab as if it was a flag.



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Turkey, Iran to stage joint raid against Kurd rebels
Iran daily calls for expulsion of French diplomats

[Lavrov: Russia seeks to strengthen relations with Gulf](#)

Wed, 2019-03-06 13:02

DUBAI: Russia aims to strengthen relations with Gulf countries, the country's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Kuwait on Wednesday.

"Russia and Saudi Arabia seek to fight terrorism in Syria," Lavrov said during a joint press conference with Kuwaiti FM Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, adding that, "Saudi Arabia sees need in creating a constitutional committee in Syria."

"The international community ties aid to Syria with a political solution to the crisis," he said.

Kuwait FM Al-Sabah said the return of Syria to the Arab community "makes us happy and we seek a speedy political solution."

Lavrov added that Russia is eager to hear more details about the US plan for peace in the region and is in communication with US to ease any further escalation in Syria.

The Russian foreign minister is currently on a tour of Gulf states.



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[Iran daily calls for expulsion of French diplomats](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-03-05 23:13

TEHRAN An ultraconservative Iranian newspaper called Tuesday for the expulsion of French diplomats from the country, accusing France of expelling an Iranian diplomat on the basis of a “ludicrous accusation.”

The Kayhan daily demanded that the Iranian Foreign Ministry reciprocate “the insolent and vile behavior of France in accusing and expelling our diplomat from its soil.”

The newspaper, considered to be the mouthpiece of ultraconservatives in Iran, reported in October that an Iranian diplomat had been expelled by France without saying why.

Neither the Iranian nor the French foreign ministries have denied or confirmed the report.

On Tuesday the paper reported in a front-page article that the diplomat had been expelled on the basis of the “ludicrous accusation of attempting to attack a meeting of the terrorist cult of hypocrites in Paris.”

It was referring to the People’s Mujahedin Organization, an opposition group in exile that aims to overthrow the Islamic republic in Iran.

Kayhan also blamed France for the arrest of another Iranian diplomat by Germany in July 2018 on suspicion of involvement in the alleged plot to bomb an Iranian opposition rally outside Paris the previous month.

The diplomat, normally based in Vienna, was extradited to Belgium for prosecution.

Kayhan, Iran’s second-oldest daily in circulation, is state owned and its managing director and editor in chief Hossein Shariatmadari was personally appointed by Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1993.

Its demand came a day after Iran expelled two Dutch diplomats in retaliation for the Netherlands’ expulsion of two Iranian embassy staff in June 2018.

According to the Dutch foreign minister Stef Blok, the Iranian diplomats had been expelled “due to strong indications from (Dutch intelligence) that Iran has been involved in the liquidations on Dutch territory of two Dutch people of Iranian origin.”

Kayhan has consistently been opposed to the policy of detente with Western powers pursued by moderate Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

It has ceaselessly attacked the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers and cited US President Donald Trump’s decision to quit the accord as an example of the futility of dealing with Western powers.



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Dutch envoy to Tehran recalled over Iran's assassination plots
Iran's Khamenei doubted Europe could help Tehran against US sanctions

[Beirut should 'reject options dictated from abroad,' says US envoy](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-03-05 22:48

BEIRUT: US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Satterfield said in Beirut that Lebanon should reject "options dictated from abroad," stressing that the "US will do everything in its power to support Lebanon's national options."

Satterfield, who had been assigned the territorial and naval border dispute file between Lebanon and Israel on the Blue Line and in the exclusive economic zone, arrived in Beirut on Monday evening to brief the Lebanese officials on the results of the Warsaw Conference, which was held in mid-February and devoted to discuss "the impact of Iran and its terrorism in the region."

Satterfield's visit to Lebanon is expected to pave the way for US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who visited the region in mid-January. He did not visit Lebanon at the time but his visit included Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Egypt and Jordan.

A source at the US Embassy did not confirm Pompeo's visit. He told Arab News that he does not "rule out his visit to Lebanon."

Satterfield said in brief statements after meeting a number of Lebanese officials, who did not include President Michel Aoun, that his country was "deeply committed to Lebanon and would like to see it move forward and face its options."

He also said after meeting Lebanese Foreign Minister Jebran Bassil, that "the US and other countries will deal with Lebanon according to the way in which Lebanon will adopt these options, which we hope will be positive for the benefit of Lebanon and its people, not for the benefit of foreign parties."

"Lebanon now has a new government to take sensitive decisions related to the country's economy, security and combating corruption," he added.

The US official, accompanied by US Ambassador to Lebanon Elizabeth Richard, visited Prime Minister Saad Hariri. During the meeting, they discussed "the latest developments, the general situation in Lebanon and the region and the bilateral relations between the two countries," according to the media office of the prime minister.

After his meeting with MP Sami Gemayel, leader of the Lebanese Phalange Party, Satterfield said that his tour in Lebanon "comes after the formation of the government and in light of the changes in the region. There is a US desire to see real stability and security in Lebanon, and this depends on its national options, not on dictated options."

"Lebanon has long suffered from conflicts and ideologies promoted from abroad," he said.

"This situation must change and there must be serious decisions in this context. The parties in Lebanon are effective and there must be national action in this direction. The US will do everything in its power to support Lebanon's national options."



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